

Isaiah 61:1-11
Psalm 122 + Luke 1:78-79 R: *Guide our feet in a path of peace.*
1Thessalonians 5:16-24
Luke 1:26-38

The Choice-less Chosen or The Women and the Wingman
December 11, 2011 3rd Sunday in Advent

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Well, well, well. It looks like even God needed a Wing-man to woo Mary.

And it worked. Even though Mary *was* "deeply disturbed" by his approach. So much so that even when the angel went on and on about how great this child was going to be, - a ruler, a holy ruler, liberating your own people, with a reign that would never end... Mary was still stuck at the beginning: She had not heard a word of it beyond "you will conceive and bear a child." And so she responds, how can that be? Not how can it be that my child will be great, but rather, how can this conception be? Any young unwed teen who is not looking to get pregnant, but looking at a positive pregnancy test I can assure you is not really interested in how great the child will be - those aren't really details that come into play in *that* moment. It's about her. "How can this be?" has probably been exclaimed countless times, and it's not that anyone needs a lesson on the birds and bees. It's an expression of disbelief. Disbelief even 'though it's in the face of perhaps the most natural occurring phenomenon. Disbelief perhaps because the readiness wasn't there, or perhaps because we were told it could not happen for us. But there's disbelief also because it touches the heart of the mystery of life which is ever ours, but never fully grasped. We can still be surprised, awed by, and afraid of something that is as old as the earth, but somehow always new.

And Mary *was* troubled by it. If you remember Abraham and Sarah who had a similar divine intervention for the birth of Isaac - a similar messenger of God entered Sarah's tent with similar word of an impossible new birth, but at least Sarah got a laugh out of it. And Mary, well, at least she didn't have to worry about choosing a name for the child on top of everything else. "You shall call the child, Jesus." One less obstacle to worry about; instead, she could focus all her anxiety on the requisite stoning that she'd no doubt rather avoid.

But on second thought, and more to the point, Mary didn't even get to choose the name of her child. In fact, she had no choice.

For even if we translate the verse the way lore has done, that this was a consensual relationship between God and Mary and there was nothing untoward because she ultimately accepted the advances of God, - or those of the wing-man, something still doesn't sit right. But you heard her: It shall be with me according to your word. Clearly that means "yes", right? And legend has turned Mary into the paragon of obedience to

God's will; or in our language: The desire of God's heart for the world was done in her, by her, and through her perfectly. And it hasn't always benefitted women.

It shall be unto me according to your word. Is this Mary's Wisdom to accept the things she cannot change? Holy, willing submission. Did she really have a choice as tradition upholds? Wouldn't it be like failing to tap out (meaning submitting) in an MMA match even though you are clearly over-powered in the shadow of the mightier one: If you don't submit, the referee will make you do it anyway. What kind of choice is that? To go dutifully, to go unwillingly, either way, you go.

But freedom of choice is a fundamental tenet of most mainstream Christianities. It's the source of empowerment, it's needed for hope. And it's almost always woven with an equally fundamental belief that God is outside time and knows all, holds all. But how to articulate the mystery of freedom in space and time within the context of a social and cosmic web bigger than us all, is no easy trick. It's a tight-rope that philosophers and theologians and scientists have been walking for years.

We like to think Mary could have said no, but we've all been faced with those damned if you do, damned if you don't situations... But really that's a critique of the tradition around Mary, - the text itself is not concerned with our concern for Mary's right to choose. Then, a woman's place was less critically accepted as in the home, pregnant and barefoot, and NO ONE said no to God. The text does not satisfy our need for choice, but what we do find there is remarkable:

In Mark there is no infancy narrative at all - no Mary, no birth, - just John the Baptist and Jesus at the Jordan. In John's Gospel, Mary doesn't get billing in the birth story either. And in Matthew, Joseph is the main character in the birth narrative, ironically. But what we have here in Luke is not about John the Baptist, not really even about Jesus, it's focus is not yet on the greatness of either of them, Mary's already dismissed that for the time-being. But it is the story of two women, - it is *their* story of expectancy. Advent is theirs.

The Gospel writer chooses to tell their stories: For both, the impossibility of conception. For both, the vision of a winged messenger with a word. For both, divine intervention to make the word flesh. They shared a similar lot. They would also both lose their sons to a premature and violent death. The author of the Gospel we call Luke may very well have had his reasons for pairing these two women: John and Jesus had no doubt been rivals, so by making their mother's not just kindred souls, but literally kin would erase that rivalry. Shared blood was shared honor. The kindred blood of their mothers united the followers of both under one family so that, as the Psalmist said, "former enemies can cry out in gratitude, we live in peace..." But for whatever reason, we now have a piece of Elizabeth's story, of Mary's story, of their own stories. These two women are drawn out, highlighted, given a voice despite having little choice. We get to look at them a little longer in Luke's family Christmas photo.

For that we can be grateful, even if we are stuck with Mary, the chosen one, having been given little choice. Or maybe it is those who have little choice who often end up being the ones that God chooses. The choice-less become chosen.

The first reading, for example, is about God choosing a people. But if we listen closely to it, the orchestral score we'd hear in the background would not be a triumphant march or epic victory, but rather a melancholic longing strain for something that is not yet, but perhaps could be. Its imagery is rich with all the sadness that is needed for hope. Those whose land, whose homes, whose livelihood, whose choices were "robbed" from them can feast on the vision of soaking in healing oils, drinking the wine of gladness, and eating the food of plenty. Those who have little choice become the chosen ones.

The idea of "justice" presented in that vision - a reversal of lots - where the poor will be the rich and the rich will work for the poor -isn't really a contemporary vision of justice which is more about leveling the playing field. But on some visceral level we all get tipping the world on its head where the corrupt-mighty come tumbling out of thrones and the humble-lowly can climb with ease to take in broader vistas.

And it's in this, we remember Mary. Perhaps once confined to a home, perhaps once without choice, perhaps of low estate, and yet now, her spirit obviously cannot be contained. Indeed, she is most often described as ubiquitous, everywhere. We try to keep her inside a house, virginal mother, while she - Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example - is out walking the wide earth and clandestinely meeting men alone on lonely hillsides, apparently doing her own visitations now, -visiting the unsuspected and unsuspecting, those who are in need, those with little clout, as she was, to give them heart, healing, and hope. To give the choiceless a voice. And we can say that, in her case, the apple didn't far fall from the tree.

We claim Mary as a model of servant leadership, a model that Jesus himself would learn from, a leader the disciples would emulate. We claim Mary who defies confinement. We claim the Mary who has her own story first, a story where the greatness of Jesus is yet an unheard melody in a distant future. In Mary, we claim Advent in its own right, before Christmas comes.

And in Advent, we're called to be Marys... We wait and we wonder at all that disturbs us, especially those things we cannot change. And we, like Mary, use the choices we do have to pave a path of peace through the midst of all that is wrong in the world, - and that choice will bring to bear something that is right.